

What is claimed is:

1. Protective device for an occupant of a vehicle comprising an inflatable cushion having first and second portions, the first portion being above and/or below the second portion when the vehicle is upright, and in which inflation of the second portion commences before inflation of the first portion.
2. Protective device according to claim 1 in which the second portion comprises a material that decreases in length when inflated so as to create tension.
3. Protective device according to claim 2 in which the length-decreasing material is distributed substantially uniformly and continuously throughout the second portion.
4. Protective device according to claim 3 where a bonded construction is used to manage the transfer of gas between the first and second sections without significant leakage.
5. Protective device according to claim 1 in which the first portion comprises at least one inflatable node adapted, when inflated, to be positioned at approximately head level of the occupant.
6. Protective device according to claim 5 in which the first portion further comprises uninflated material adjacent the at least one inflatable node.
7. Protective device according to claim 1 further comprising an inflator connected to the vehicle and to the second portion and capable of moving as the second portion inflates.
8. Protective device comprising:
 - a. an inflator;

b. an inflatable curtain in fluid communication with the inflator and comprising:

i. a first inflatable portion comprising material that decreases in length when inflation occurs; and

ii. a second inflatable portion; and

c. a cover in which the inflatable curtain is positioned when uninflated.

9. Protective device according to claim 8 in which inflation of the inflatable curtain pulls the inflatable curtain downward out of the cover.

10. Protective device according to claim 9 in which the material is braided and has generally circular or U-shaped cross-section.

11. Protective device according to claim 10 in which the braided material has a non-uniform shape, in order to improve deployment between the seat and the vehicle structure.

12. Protective device according to claim 10 in which the material forms a taut, semi-rigid, generally linear member when the first inflatable portion is inflated.

13. Protective device according to claim 12 in which the inflator moves with the material when the inflatable curtain is pulled downward out of the cover.

14. Protective device for an occupant of a vehicle comprising an inflatable cushion having first and second portions, and in which (i) inflation of the second portion commences before inflation of the first portion and (ii) the first portion comprises at least one inflatable node extending outward from the second portion.

15. Protective device according to claim 14 where the inflatable node is positioned optimally for one or more of:
- A. torso protection;
 - B. head protection; or
 - C. pre-loading of the occupant.
16. Protective device according to claim 1 in which the first portion comprises at least one inflatable node adapted, when inflated, to be positioned at approximately shoulder level of the occupant.